

Von Blixum's Heroic Experiment **By Henry W. Parker**

It is high time that justice be done to my friend Blixum. Certainly, it is time that the world be put in possession of a discovery, which, next to Animal Magnetism, the Water Cure, and the Electro-Magnetic Telegraph, (with all of which it is intimately connected,) is the most wonderful development of the age. I do not hesitate to say, that it will speedily effect a revolution in society—in the whole economy of life—such as the world has never seen, or dreamed of seeing. The experiments of the immortal Von Blixum have proved triumphantly successful, and I therefore make the assertion advisedly; though not without some fear, and extreme modesty—not on my own account, for I claim no share in the astonishing discoveries I am about to disclose—but for the reason that men are so ready to meet every advance in science with chilling incredulity and heartless sarcasm.

It may gratify a reasonable curiosity, as well as prepare the reader to appreciate better the claims of both the discovery and the discoverer, if I first describe the man, and relate the circumstances under which I made his acquaintance. It is also much preferable, that the scientific hints, facts, and premises, and the process of reasoning which led my friend to so marvelous results, be given in his own words, as nearly as I can recollect them. Not to tantalize the curious, it may be remarked, however, at the outset, that Von Blixum—BLUNDERVICH VON BLIXUM—has realized what may have occurred to many as a most desirable impossibility, namely: The instantaneous transportation of one's self to any distance, by means of the Electro-Magnetic Telegraph! This, perhaps, is the most brilliant feature of the discovery, although it is accompanied with results of even more than practical moment—such as a perfect realization of the ultimatum of the old Gnostic philosophers and mystic sects—complete freedom from the chains and pains of matter; the elevation of the laboring classes, and a general relief from the present faulty construction of society; and also a triumphant vindication of all fuel-saving inventions and systems of scientific starvation—not by showing their individual utility, but by surpassing, and thus dispensing with them altogether—food and fuel being, on my friend's system, no longer necessary in any shape. But to my story!

In the course of a pedestrian journey, during the summer of 1845, I had occasion to pass through an extensive tract of partially wooded and thinly inhabited land, for the purpose of saving several miles of circuitous road. Near the middle of the day, I encountered a man, whose odd appearance and singular equipments at once arrested my attention. Seemingly quite advanced in life, for his long, gray hair, in part discolored to a dingy yellow, hung over his shoulders, he was short, thick-set, and clad in a towering fur cap, a threadbare, faded, green surtout, buttoned to the chin, and old-fashioned gaiters, fastened at the knee with rusty steel buckles. His face, full and round, bore a peculiarly benignant expression, despite a gray, scrubby beard and moustaches, while his complexion, sallow and leathery, completed the foreign, antiquated, moldy look of his whole figure. An ancient pair of spectacles, with enormous circular glasses, clung to his little bulbous nose, unassisted by the modern side-supports; a short German pipe, with a crooked stem and capacious bowl, capped with a brass cover, depended from his pinched-up lips; A ponderous musket was in his hands, and an uncouth powder-flask hung upon one side, balanced on the other by a battered tin box (used, as I afterwards

learned, to preserve botanical specimens); These, with sundry other curious receptacles suspended about him, and a stiff gauze net for entrapping insects, attached to a long staff, and looking like a countess-dowager's cap of state, completed his list of accoutrements—not forgetting, however, a fishing-rod and basket upon the ground beside him. Muddy, fudgy, enthusiastic little Blixum. Never shall I forget thy quaint, hearty look, although thou art now—not dead, indeed—but I am anticipating the sequel.

When I first beheld the solitary stranger, he was in the act of aiming his gun at the top of a dry pine (I think at a common black crow)! I waited until he fired, and seeing that he was disappointed in the effect of his shot, I approached and addressed him. He replied to my salutation with great affability, and in broken English, mingled with so many German words and idioms, as to leave no doubt respecting the land of his nativity. I gradually drew from him his name and history, and found that he had been all his live a resident of Gottingen, (where he was borne and educated,) until a year or two since, when he came to this country for the purpose of satisfying his curiosity and scientific tastes. He had traveled through a part of South America, Mexico, and the Southern States, and for several months had been living in the vicinity of the spot where I found him. Our conversation then turned successively upon nearly all the departments of science, and even Phrenology and Mesmerism, in all of which he seemed quite at home, and highly enthusiastic; then we ran through some German names of note—Kant, Leibnitz, Priessnitz, Spurzheim, Hahnemann, etc.—with the history and achievements of each, and the personal appearance of some of whom, he was well acquainted. He claimed for his father-land precedence in everything, and waxed more eloquent every moment in dilating about it; in short, he seemed to be a universal genius, familiar with everything, believing everything, and lauding to the skies the most contradictory theories and systems, (provided they were German,) and so sanguine, that he was ready to go off into rhapsody upon every wild, extravagant conjecture that has been, or can be, started. I came to the conclusion that he was possessed of credulity and a passion for castle-building amounting almost to monomania.

After we had passed several hours in this manner, our conversation happened upon the magnetic telegraph, and I remarked, that one glory was yet reserved for genius to achieve, or rather lay beyond its utmost powers, and that was, to make electricity a vehicle for ourselves, as well as for our thoughts. The remark certainly appeared to be quite electrical in its effect upon him, for he sprang immediately to his feet, faced about, leaned eagerly towards me, and, laying one hand upon my shoulder, and taking off his antique spectacles with the other, held them at arm's length, while he puffed vigorously at his pipe, and stared at me with his merry twinkling, gray eyes. At length he inquired, hesitatingly, if he could trust me, and receiving an affirmative reply, declared that he would reveal to me a wonderful secret, if I would follow him and never open my lips concerning what I should see or hear.

So long had we protracted our conversation, that it was now late in the afternoon; indeed, I had become so interested in my new acquaintance and his decidedly original character, and had gathered such a fund of information from him, notwithstanding his eccentricities, that I hardly noted the lapse of time. The beams of the sinking sun slanted through the foliage of the forest, lighting up with transparent brilliance, or throwing into rich shade, the old trees—

“Those green-robed senators of mighty woods.”

We rose from the mossy, fallen pine trunk, upon which we had been sitting, and having offered myself to carry a part of his scientific implements, my friend Von Blixum filled and lighted his pipe, and taking the lead, trudged off towards his unknown home. He was, in truth, an indefatigable little man, talking incessantly all the way in a highly transcendental and often finely imaginative strain, not without forgetting himself occasionally, and striking off into a harangue of pure German, the more unintelligible to me as I was often forced to dodge very suddenly the rebounding boughs and brushwood, through which he fearlessly and rapidly pushed his way, better protected from mutilation of the eyes by his vast spectacle glasses.

At length we came to an open glade, and the sound of falling water arrested my attention. As we emerged from the wood, the open space discovered itself to be a small, narrow valley, surrounded by forest, and cradling a large stream, which fell at the upper extremity of the vale in a beautiful cascade. By the side of this, stood a ruined mill, overgrown with moss and weeds, its roof half fallen in, and the wheel, broken and crumbling, was unswung from its sockets and leaned against the building. Scattered through the valley, were two or three untenanted, decayed log-huts; the remains of a rude bridge spanned the stream; the fences were broken down, and the road so encumbered with a growth of bushes, that, although I afterwards found that the locality was but four miles from the thrifty village of O----, and in a country advancing in population like our own, yet for some reason, this incipient settlement in the heart of the forest seemed to have been abandoned for many long years.

Mynheer Von Blixum turned to me, and pointing to the ruined mill, exclaimed, "There, sir, is my domicile and laboratory, and I assure you it is more pregnant with disaster to steam engines, material medica, and the entire present economy of civilization, than was the wooden horse of the Greeks with disaster to the Trojans! Nodding assent to this very luminous remark, I followed him across the stream and into the mill. We ascended a rickety flight of stairs, and arriving at the door of a chamber, the old man pulled a concealed string which lifted a bar within, and gave us entrance. I entered, and beheld a scene which verily would have rejoiced the eyes of an alchemist of the Middle Ages, or the rustiest old antiquary of modern days; indeed, had Von Blixum lived a few centuries ago, doubtless he would have died in search of the philosopher's stone or the alkahest, but happening upon our day most fortunately, he is destined, as will be seen, to a more honorable and grateful memory. There is, after all, a spice of monomania—a tendency to wild, insane conjecture, necessary to form the great discoverer; your safe, practical men would never have hit upon my friend Blundervich's curious theory—much less have carried it out into actual experiment. Be this as it may, I was soon comfortably ensconced in his sanctum; it was a small apartment, dingy with smoke and dust, abundantly draped with cobwebs, filled with disorderly heaps of books, papers, minerals, dried reptiles, stuffed birds, squirrels, and one or two crocodiles—the results of my friend's American travels; and upon rude shelves stood a variety of apparatus of private manufacture, such as a galvanic battery, formed from a detached bucket of the old mill-wheel; and an electrical machine, constructed in part of a glass, confectioner's jar. But time forbids an extended description; posterity must content itself with this brief notice of the man and his habitudes.

In an hour or two, by united efforts, we had built a fire in the huge chimney, made of unhewn stones; dressed, fried, and dispatched, with great gusto, some woodcock and

pigeons—the results of Mynheer's excursions in the forest—together with farinaceous accompaniments, and several tankards of beer, the latter being of course an indispensable item to a German literatus. During all these processes, my host continued with ingenuous volubility to give me scraps of his history, especially of his wanderings in this country, concerning whose scenery, scientific treasures, and free government, he was rapturously enthusiastic; he also detailed how he had accidentally stumbled upon the deserted mill, while hunting in the woods; how, fancy in the idea of a temporary hermit's life in this great wilderness, (for such he considered the whole country) and also the better to conduct some experiments, on which he had long been pondering, he had taken possession of the chamber, and moved several capricious trunks full of his effects thither; how the flume of the mill, by a little repairing, would assist admirably in his intended experiment in hydropathy, which science he was about to carry to unprecedented perfection, so as to make it not only a panacea for all human ills, but also a mighty step into a higher civilization and an earthly immortality; how, finally, fearing some accident might befall himself or his abode, he had long wished for a trusty, sympathizing friend, to whom he could unveil the secret of his retreat and his profound plans of operation. In fact, my eccentric host, having almost entirely shut himself out from the society of his species for a long tie, seemed to have accumulated an inexhaustible fund of conversation, the relieving himself of which cost him no further effort than to put his tongue for once in motion. Since I first met him, and gained somewhat upon his confidence, his ideas had been flowing almost tumultuously from his lips, like an Alpine torrent, swollen to a fearful height among the mountains by an obscuring avalanche, which had at last given way to the pressure.

The night, although in September, proved chill and stormy: We renewed the not unwelcome fire, and supplied each with a meerschaum, which Mynheer had brought from his father-land, and abundant store of the fragrant weed, procured far in the sunny South by himself, we threw ourselves back at our ease in roomy arm-chairs which my good philosopher, with a regard to luxury quite inconsistent with his amateur hermit life, had constructed of loose boards, and lined with rich buffalo robes—trophies of a tour of his on the western prairies.

And now did the immortal Blundervich Von Blixum first pause in portentous silence, and giving a few slow, magnificent puffs at his pipe, prepare to disclose the great secret of his soul—a revelation for which I had waited with continually sharpening curiosity. He began with a lengthy, formal eulogium on Mesmer, the father of the science of Animal Magnetism, and passed from to Priessnitz, the great doctor of Grafenburg; after dwelling long and magniloquently on their achievements, he struck off into metaphysics, and grew so animated and transcendental at every puff of his meerschaum, that I could get little more than a confused impression of his meaning. I would gladly give his discourse verbatim, but it has vanished from my memory like a gorgeous dream or sunset cloud, leaving only a meager residuum. He proceeded to state—and you must allow a half-hour for his own elaboration of each statement—that the principle of life is electricity, or magnetism, or electro-magnetism; that the thinking principle or soul inhabits this, and through it acts upon the muscular system; that this connection of the immaterial conscious essence with the most subtle form of matter—magnetism—gives to the latter defined form permanency and inseparable cohesion, while it still leaves to it the elastic property of the fluid as generated by artificial apparatus; that

death is a separation of the pure thinking principle from the mass or body of magnetism, taking from its permanent and internally cohesive property, and leaving it in the muscular structure, ever after to be divisible and evanescent, like the same fluid in its free state, uncompounded with mind,—in fact, entering into that state; that nothing now remains but to anticipate our dissolution by carefully separating or eliminating the entire cohesive mass of individual magnetism, thus keeping that and the soul in indissoluble connection, whereas, in the common course of things, there must eventually be a violent disruption of them, the escaping soul being unable to segregate the magnetic or fluid body from the deceased muscular and osseous body; that this separation of the two, leaving the soul still connected with the former, may be gradually and successfully accomplished by a long-continued subjection to the “douche bath” employed in the Water Cure—in other words by exposing one’s self to a stream of water, falling from a spout in the ceiling of a room, until every particle of the gross body of nerves, blood, flesh and bones, is worn away and carried off by the actions of water, leaving the magnetic fluid body free, yet associated with the mind; that in this state we can assume any shape when passing through conducting substances, but will invariably return to a form similar to that of our present visible bodies, while free to assume that form in a non-conducting receptacle, so that we can be elongated to a thread-like linear condition in passing through telegraphic wire, and be received at the termination of the wire in an air-tight, flexible shell, armor, dress, or bag, composed of a non-conductor,—for instance, pasteboard, silk, cotton, hair, Indian rubber, or glass,—the armor or sack being the human shape, so that the magnetic body may just fill and be fitted to it, and thus move about and act upon external matter as now; the fluid body, by its association with the conscious, voluntary soul, still retaining its motive, active powers!

The profound Von Blixum was now fairly *in nubibus*, and, throwing back his head, and puffing away more vehemently than ever, launched into a glowing picture of the world, when our diseased, dying, and with all the miracles of steam, slow traveling race should be freed and washed clean of these aching bodies, and jumping instantaneously through the magnetic telegraph to any conceivable distance at pleasure; he even suggested that we might possibly be able to travel to and from the sun, moon, and stars, through the magnetic ray of light detected by the prism. He considered Indian rubber shells or dresses, moreover, better and more durable than any other non-conductor,—perhaps, as they had recently, in Europe, invented malleable glass, that substance might be made sufficiently ductile and elastic, and, if so, a whole crowd would be perfectly transparent, and no man be in another’s light; and then he would have a great quantity and variety of these suits of armor, or rather artificial bodies, at every telegraph office, to receive the spiritualized passengers, there to be left also when they departed through the wires; and then, too, we might have artificial palates and lungs for talking, or one person might pass directly into another’s hollow body, thus intermingling and interchanging thought by silent, immediate felt communion,—certainly, with glass eyes, we should have no difficulty in seeing, as the soul is alone truly and all sensitive; and as for the other senses, such powers would be for the most part superfluous, having no more occasion for fuel, food, nor indeed sleep! Upon this, his thoughts returned to himself, and feeling, doubtless, that he had justly earned immortal fame by so splendid and benevolent a discovery, he exclaimed, “Ah, how will posterity then regard me?” Glad of some relief to an incontrollable sense of the ludicrous which had gradually crept over me,

I sprang to my feet, and seizing his hand, shouted, "Immortal Von Blixum! Immortal Von Blixum!"

Reassured by applause, our philosopher struck off at a fresh gallop upon Leibnitz' theory of monads, and Boscovich's conjecture that matter is only a congeries of attracting points, asserting his belief that these immaterial monads or points might be made perfectly mobile, so that any body could be drawn out into a mathematical line, for convenience in a telegraphic transportation; or, otherwise, that any substance, merchandise, houses, even sphinxes, obelisks and pyramids, as well as men and animals, might be subjected to his through-going Water Cure, and become so clarified from gross matter, so liquefied, or rather etherealized, as to be easily run through the electromagnetic telegraph, and afterwards, returning by some occult law to their original shape, be reëndued with their visible and tangible properties by a possible process yet undiscovered,—a process similar to that of petrification, only more rapid. At this point, from the reaction of my long-sustained and now both gratified and disappointed curiosity, as well as in consequence of the lateness of the hour and fatiguing influences of the day, I fairly laughed myself asleep.

The sun had long been shining through chinks in the crazy old building, when I awoke and proceeded to arouse Mynheer Von Blixum, who had probably talked himself asleep long after I became unconscious, and was now snoring away at as persevering and glorious a rate as he had talked. We breakfasted on cold pigeon and biscuit, and before I resumed my journey, my host, as voluble concerning his great projects as on the night before, showed me the apparatus by which he intended to carry them into effect. They consisted of a branch from the repaired flume of the mill, leading into his room, where it protruded from the ceiling and was stopped by a facet; this was his inexhaustible "douche bath," which, by its continued action, was to disintegrate his visible from his magnetic inner body. Beneath this stood a large box, in which he was to sit exposed to the falling stream; the bottom perforated with holes to admit the escape of the water and of his material structure, as fast as it was worn away; from this led a conducting wire, to receive his fluid body, as soon as it was wholly emancipated from the flesh; the wire was stretched upon glass knobs in the walls, and, passing several times around the room (to make the experiment more satisfactory, and give greater variety to his first telegraphic journey) terminated in a suite of armor or artificial body, which was to take the place of his troublesome flesh and bones. This was simply a hollow pasteboard shell—a facsimile of himself—jointed together with hinges of silk, (a non-conductor like the paper) and having glass eyes, where from the etherealized Blixum could look abroad; it was also lined with tin-foil throughout, like a Leyden jar,—our experimenter not yet being certain whether the freed and soul-inhabited body of human magnetism would expand to its original shape in its former animal body or would betake itself to surfaces, like common electricity.

After examining all these with a believing and interested air, I bade my good friend adieu, promising to be at the mill just four months therefrom, by which time he calculated his experiment would be completed, so that he would be able to receive me in his glorified, pasteboard state.

"Ha, ha! My fond philosopher," shouted I, as beyond his hearing, "your douche bath will give you a damper—a chilling dissuasion from your foolhardy purpose, long before you can carry it into execution." Ah! Little did I appreciate the self-denying and

quenchless courage of the devoted Von Blixum, or think that I had shaken his honest fleshy hand for the last time! Nevertheless, as the months slipped away, I could not but fancy him sitting patiently under his cold, hard-pouring bath, and gradually dissected by the sharp, cutting torrent—first denuded of his epidermis, next his muscles and veins laid bare and ghastly as a manikin, then a mere fibrous mass of nerves and ligaments, then a skeleton, and lastly, every bone washed away, leaping ecstatically though the conducting wire of his telegraph.

The snow was upon the ground and sprinkled over the leafless forest-trees, when, punctual to my engagement, I turned aside from a journey through the same region, to visit the ruined mill. As I approached it alone, on a bright wither evening, I saw that the snow was untrampled in the little secluded valley and around the building, and I trembled to think that my worthy friend might long since have been frozen to death, or perished by some fatal accident. A cold tremor crept over me as I unbarred the chamber door, and catching the sound of falling water, stepped into the chill, silent apartment; I drew forth a match and lighted the stump of a candle, fortunately left upon the mantle-piece, over the huge fire-place; then, turning around, I distinguished one after another of the chests, specimens, apparatus and furniture, in the same state that I saw them four months before. Finally, I cast my eye with a shudder into the perforated box, beneath the douche bath; the water was pouring furiously down, and in a mass of foam at the bottom—*mirabile scriptu!*—lay the poor man's antique spectacles!

The thought flashed through my mind that the dauntless Von Blixum had fulfilled his resolution, and involuntarily I looked around to find him standing in his artificial body. I was not disappointed, for at that instant he advanced from a corner of the room—positively advanced, not in his once venerable and merry-looking flesh and blood, but in the pasteboard shell, his step easy and firm, his glass eyes glowing with a blue, inner, electric light, and the paper breast and sides heaving and shaking, as if his spiritualized body were convulsed with laughter. I staggered with terror against the wall.

Of my gradual recovery and feelings long tumultuous, I leave imagination to supply the detail, while I hasten to the conclusion of this most veritable disclosure. I was soon on the same familiar terms with this great modern discoverer, though not without a double awe from sitting in the presence of such a genius, and so metamorphosed and embodied. The figure, after extending its hollow hand and pressing mine with silent congratulation, sat down and wrote some paragraphs to the effect that he (Von B.) had just substituted a few inches of small hair-wire, at a certain point in the telegraph for the purpose of ascertaining through how small a conductor he could pass in his present state, having accomplished an instantaneous transit through the large wire when first freed, the day before, from his former gross body; also informing me that he had prepared another artificial body (connected with one end of the wire) into which, after making the tour of the chamber—in fact passing five times around—he would enter, leaving the armor he then inhabited to collapse and fall, immediately on his darting into the other end of the telegraph. Curious to see this sudden change of place and dress, or rather body, I watched him as he passed the nearest end of the wire through the silken joints of his paper fingers; in an instant his first receptacle collapsed; the corresponding one at the other extremity was not moved and inflated by his presence; no, the bit of intervening hair-wire upon the opposite wall, through which he trusted safely to pass, at the self-same

instant glowed with white heat—melted—dropped! I seized the light and ran to the spot; an upright beam of wood in the wall at that point was scorched and shivered to the floor; I ran down into the lower apartment; the same terrible effect was visible to the very ground, which, ploughed up a little way from the beam, lay all beyond undisturbed beneath the moonlit snow! The daring philosopher had involuntarily escaped beyond recovery; he had perished a sacrifice to science.

Profound Von Blixum! Indomitable Von Blixum! Immortal Von Blixum! Reach me a fan, reader, lest I go off into a swoon or sonnet!